

# **NO-HITTER**

by

*Erik R. Segall*

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## Chapter 1: jungle-gym

War isn't hell, the first day of middle school is. They first met in confluence of laughter. Charging in from sunny recess, boys and girls shoved each other, a chaotic mass of inertia flowing through a tiny portal back into the dreary doldrums of confusing chalkboards. Children like comets pulled into a black hole, a celestial collision in the doorway between heavenly freedom and eternal textbook damnation. Louie slammed into a wall of giggles, arms and hair, lost in a heaping mound of pre-pubescent calamity. The boy, tumbled in the wave of bodies, emerged face to face with Timmy's thin angular visage and star-bright eyes. Their foreheads greeted in a big bang swirling within a dozen limbs. In a moment of creation, Louie and Timmy bore witness to a cosmic fate named kinship.

Moody and Dirty, the Irish twins, preyed upon Timmy's softness. On the first day, they stole his lunch milk. Drank it right in front of him and ate his Cheetos, too. After school, they caught Timmy on the playground. He sat on the peak of the metal jungle gym, watching for his mother's car. She's was often in a rush and always late. Never made much sense to him. Timmy thought maybe if she ran fast enough, she'd catch up with herself.

He waited without complaint. Usually no other kids lingered, but today the twins in his grade lurked beneath the jungle gym. Bigger boys. The dirty-faced one and the moody one with long black hair.

"Come on down, sissy," said Moody.

"Yeah, we wants to talk at 'cha," offered Dirty.

Timmy knew what came next. They will tease me, he thought, the way they make fun of the girls. He figured his mom would be here soon enough or maybe they'd tire of harassing him. Timmy grabbed the steel bar, hot from the afternoon sun, and hang-dropped to the ground. He landed on his knee, the pebbles tearing a hole in his jeans. The three of them stared at the blood dripping from the deep scratch.

Dirty announced, "Oh, poor baby gonna cry now?"

"No." It did hurt, thought Timmy, but I won't cry. Not in front of these two losers.

Moody stepped closer and pushed Timmy. "Maybe we can make you cry, little sissy."

When Timmy fell to the ground, the two boys jumped on him. Dirty kicked him hard in the stomach and his breathe was gone. As he reached up to stop them, Moody drew his hand back. The punch arrived in sections, a strobe light separating time, closer and closer. Even years

later, he could still feel the sting. The blunt pain echoed through the years, derailing his intended course of gentle empathy. The force set him off-track into collision with a fist. Little popping stars clouded his vision, a kaleidoscope of fireworks. Thoughtless with stolen breath, unable to flee. Utterly helpless.

Thirteen years old and these bullies gifted Timmy the clarity to view violence as a tool for power. As a slave in a newly discovered natively-alienated world, his masters had dominion over him yet without the tears of servitude. Only one thought escaped through the pain: *don't cry*. The command emerged from inside his stomach, oozing into a black ball of tar. And his inner sentience repeated the phrase: *don't cry*.

The boys laughed while Timmy tried to crawl away. Air, liberator from enslavement, conjured a word. Not a pleading request begging them to cease torture but instead a simple interrogative.

“Why?” he asked innocently. Grabbing him by the shoulder, Dirty turned him over and sat on his chest. The heavy boy, once again stealing Timmy’s breath, crushed all hope for a reprieve. The pregnant sticky ball of tar swelled in his belly.

“Why? Haha, listen to this little girl,” Dirty declared, giving Moody a high-five.

Moody leaned over Timmy and put his face right up against his. A little spittle dripped down from his mouth onto Timmy’s face. “You probably like that, don’t you, weirdo.”

Dirty laughed again and revealed, “You know why...because we can.”

“I won’t cry, you can’t make me.”

“Oh, yeah?” Dirty said, raising a demonic fist.

Suddenly, Timmy could breathe. The weight lifted off his chest as Dirty crashed to the ground. A blur, maybe a foot, connected with Dirty’s jaw. Moody turned in time to see a fist greet him heartily in the nose. He dropped to the ground, blood on his shirt and water in his eyes.

Timmy sat up as Louie glowered down at the two boys. He held out his raw knuckled hand and helped Timmy up.

“You okay?” Louie asked.

Timmy straightened his shirt and stared hotly at Louie. His head ached and he found relief through his breath. “I’m fine. You didn’t have to hurt them, you know.”

Letting out a chuckle, Louie said, “You *are* weird. Most people are crying right about now. They beat you up and you don’t want me to hurt them?”

Dirty rolled on the ground as Timmy felt black tar boil inside.

“That’s not what I mean. I don’t want YOU to hurt them...” Timmy stepped up and kicked Dirty in the ribs. “But I do.”

Louie had seen plenty of people in his neighborhood get beat up and the victim always cried and lowered their gaze for a few days. In fact, Louie thought, this skinny kid just got stronger, a slab of metal pounded by a sledgehammer. Serenity, crafted and refined.

Timmy slowly walked across the playground and slapped Moody in the face. Open-handed and fast, more of an insult than a strike. Moody wailed, his crimson face bubbling.

A fabricated sense of domination overwhelmed Timmy and he thought, “Must I become a bully to not be a victim?” He was the simulation of a boy, a neutered version of a superhero, pretending to be tough.

The sound of a car horn jolted Timmy from his thoughts.

“Is that your mom?” Louie asked.

“Yeah, I gotta go.” Running off, he turned to Louie. “Hey, thanks.”

“Weirdo,” Louie said with a laugh.

## Chapter 2: black-eye

The world's greatest baseball rivalry is . . . a sham!

Sitting in the locker room with a black eye, Timmy Franks stares at the ceiling. The cement-floored room echoes with voices.

“Great pitching, Fastball Franks!”

“Another no-hitter.”

“A perfect game!”

Franks nods and smiles, lifts an ice-bag to his cheek, and sighs. His teammates leave him alone.

In the other locker room, Louie Hernandez punches the steel door of his locker. Repeatedly.

Junior waits a moment, then pats him on the back. “Hey, I know we lost. Big deal, right? We’ll get ‘em next time.”

Hernandez turns around and Junior steps back, afraid he might end up resembling the locker door. Hernandez doesn’t say a word but grabs his cell phone, pauses, and throws it on the ground.

The players and the fans disperse into the cool summer night. Around midnight, a quiet neighborhood in Hunters Point is host to a secret rendezvous. The view from the penthouse window, across the South Basin, twinkle the lights of Candlestick Park. Two men chat on a Corinthian leather couch, sharing green-glass bottled beer.

Franks leans back with an ice pack on his face. “I thought you were going to the body, so I ducked and you caught me in the eye”.

“I know. I tried to stop at the last second, but I saw the cameras on me and had to follow through.”

“Let’s watch the replay, I bet it’s on ESPN.”

The highlights focus on the rare feat of a no-hitter. Franks pitched all nine innings without a single hit, only the second time this year from any team in the League. The fight is shown in slow-mo and high-def. The punch comes and in unison they exclaim, “oooooooooh.”

Hernandez pats his friend on the shoulder. “Pobrecito, sorry ‘bout that.”

“Ah, that’s ok. You’re getting me back for the nasty shot a few years ago.”

“You mean, broken rib in ’08?”

“Figured you Dodgers wouldn’t make the play-offs anyway. Last game, didn’t really matter. We were up ten to one.”

“I know, but at least you could have dropped the bat.”

“Come on Louie, we’ve been over this a hundred times. Junior was my target, you got in the way.”

“Hey, you’re the ace-pitcher for the Giants, not me.”

“Gimme a break, who paid for all your bills and the vacation to the Bahamas for you, Ella and the boys?”

“I know, thanks,” Hernandez says, smile accompanying a high-five.

They spend the rest of the evening going over old video footage of games and fights, with plenty of hoots of laughter and sighs of pain.

Franks turns off the television and tosses the remote. “You know, one of these days, someone is going to see right through our little charade...”

## Chapter 2.5: fake-out

Nathan Phillips, sports editor for the *Los Angeles Times*, has drawn a crowd. Pointing emphatically to the laptop on his desk, Dayrll, Roberta and a few other colleagues gaze dubiously at the screen.

“Is it me or do they fight like wrestlers from WWF?” Nathan spurts his words rapid fire. His accent is East Coast and resembles most of the staff. No one is actually from L.A.

“Not again, seriously?” emerges from the crowd.

Dayrll J. Lincoln, the youngest man in the office, residing in the next cubicle leans back in his chair and says, “Just ‘bout blinded my man Franks last night.”

“Langston Hughes speaks!” Nathan exclaims, smoothing back his greasy red hair. “You’re all simple-minded. When was the last time one of them actually got hurt? Never! Franks wipes a little blood from his nose and Hernandez rolls around on the ground holding his gut. That’s how the scrap always ends! I mean, check out the size of Hernandez. He could whip Jack Johnson and Joe Louis at the same time.”

From the back row, a voice peeps out, “Jack Johnson, the musician?”

Nathan sighs, “No, the boxer.”

An older sports writer chimes in. “Hell, I heard Franks has a one-two like Peter Jackson.”

“The director of *The Hobbit*?”

“The boxer!”

“I heard Franks has a vicious left hook.”

Dayrll and a few others nod in agreement. “Really, they’ve been going at it for years, since they were kids, everyone knows that. Why would they be faking it?”

As everyone drifts back to work, Nathan strokes his thin reddish-blond goatee and mutters at the screen. “Ignorant chimps, all of ‘em.”

### Chapter 3: baby-duck

Leaving the jungle-gym behind, Timmy wasn't quiet for very long.

"Mom," Timmy asked, climbing into their new '85 Civic, "why did Dad leave us?"

Susan grabbed the wheel tightly when she noticed his knee. "What happened to you? Why are you bleeding?"

"Oh, it's nothing, really. Fell off the jungle gym." He hated lying to his mother. Besides, she would know. Currently a grad student in Psychology at State, she had moved them here over the summer from Baltimore. When he had asked her why psychology, his mother's answer was cryptic. *I study people, not books.*

He tried to change the subject. "Did you straighten your hair again?"

Susan ignored the question, caressing his bruised face in her hands. "Are you okay? Does it hurt?"

Lavender. Her hands always smelled of lavender from the hand lotion. Maybe that's what drove my father away, he thought.

"Don't deflect, Mom. Of course pain hurts, but it's no longer bleeding. I'm fine now. A friend helped me up when I fell down." He paused then continued. "So, what about Dad?"

Susan could tell he wanted an answer. Sharp and persistent, he was reversing her own parental tricks. She struggled to answer his rarely asked question. Why now, she thought.

"Did something happen today to make you think of him?" she answered calmly, pulling the car into traffic.

Timmy protested, "Come on mom, don't dodge me. I want to know why he doesn't live with us."

"You mean where is he living? I suppose he went to L.A." She added for emphasis, "Everyone I've ever hated moved there."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. What'd you fight about? There has to be a reason, right?"

Susan paused. Damn, too smart for his age. How could she explain the dynamics of the turbulent relationship with a man she'd only known a few months?

"I was young and naïve..."

Timmy interrupted her, "Yeah, you've said that before. Only eighteen, fell in love at first sight, right?"

“What’s this really about? Did you see someone today?”

Timmy turned away so his mother could not see him blush. “No, that’s not it. You know I don’t like girls...”

Susan decided not to have such a conversation today. Love, difficult to reveal made impossible by guilt.

Timmy continued. “I mean, you got in a fight, right? That’s how I’ve always pictured it. You standing on the porch, pregnant with me, yelling at him while he packed up the car.”

Susan laughed. “We lived in an apartment. We didn’t have a porch. And he only got the motorcycle and a blender.”

“Mommmmm...”

Susan turned the corner and decided not to stop at the super market for dinner. In the freezer lingered one last frozen pizza, and maybe some peas, too.

“Fine, fine. Yes, we did have a fight. There were a lot of fights, I really don’t remember what about. We were poor. I’m sure we fought about money.”

“There must be something you remember. He simply left and never called? Never tried to come back?” Timmy asked sincerely. Susan knew she should give a good answer and decided he might be ready for a dose of truth. She pulled off Berkley Ave, drove through the park and idled in front of a small duck pond by the road. She began to cry.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to . . .”

Susan took a deep breath. “No, it’s ok. Just give me a second.”

Ducks swirled overhead, lethargic in the upstate New York summer’s bliss. The pond, months ago a solitary icy refuge, had become a downy sea of migratory transients. “Don’t think tears will let you off the hook.”

Susan laughed. “You are relentless. You want to know about your father, but I’m sorry. I can’t really give you any details. He was so handsome, and skinny, like you.” She paused again and gazed at the ducks circling the pond.

“What is it, Mom? Why did he leave us?”

“He probably didn’t think he was leaving ‘us’. There was no ‘us’ yet. He wanted to get away from me, such a selfish boy . . . and I probably pushed him away. There were other women, so I yelled a lot, and threw things, too.”

“He probably deserved it. But I can’t imagine you getting so angry.”

Susan chuckled to herself. “No, he didn’t. Our past was not placid. Hormones, you’ll see. They’ll send you right through the tunnel of love and into the channel of crazy.”

“There must have been more, right?”

Susan faced her son and started to speak then stopped. Timmy grabbed her hand. “That’s what I want to hear, Mom. Tell me.”

“Oh, alright. How can I say this so you’ll understand?”

“Just say it. If I don’t comprehend today, I’ll figure it out later.”

The kid is going to be fine when he’s older, Susan thought. It’s the present that concerns me.

She gazed out the window again, ducks soaring with past memories. “You see, he was a boy back then. Maybe he still is. Some men are always boys and some boys...”

“...are men,” Timmy finished for her. “Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll always be your little boy.”

Her throat choked with tears. She wasn’t ready for him to grow up.

Timmy persisted, “So, what’s the difference between a boy and a man?”

“I don’t mean to preach but, oh lawd, you asked for it. A man is one who can empathize with someone else’s condition. Someone outside of himself.” Susan smiled, “Helps him understand a woman.”

“Like that’s even possible,” Tommy said with a grin.

Susan laughed and took a sip of her coffee. “I use my mind to sympathize and my heart to empathize, follow me?”

Timmy nodded as his mother continued, “Empathy helps a man to unload his own burdens and grasp the feelings which motivate us and the struggles that overwhelm us.”

“So empathy is the opposite of selfishness?”

“A lesson only learned once I gave birth to you. Maybe by having a child we finally learn to care about someone other than ourselves. Can’t really understand our parents until we become one.”

Timmy leaned on his mother’s shoulder as she stroked his tightly coiled hair. Together, they watched a brown baby duck persistently swim away from its mother, but the broadbilled mallard kept pulling the duckling back with her beak.

-end-